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ABSTRACT

Recent research on the historical and political influences affecting the relationship between local school boards and superintendents is summarized and discussed in this paper. Following a brief summary of the historical development of the superintendency in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the author contrasts the opposing viewpoints of Callahan and Tucker and Zeigler regarding the actual balance of power between boards and superintendents. Callahan believes the evolution of superintendencies has provided boards and superintendents with a system of checks and balances while still giving citizens a voice in the schools. Tucker and Zeigler see instead a lack of balance, rising superintendent dominance, and a loss of citizens' power. The paper next examines the status of superintendents today. It cites Zeigler and Jennings book, "Governing American Schools," which concludes that the superintendent is clearly dominant over the school board, and contrasts this view with the positions of Cuban and Boyd, who assert that a variety of political and social factors influence the relative power of superintendents. The author concludes that the local boards themselves are in the best position to decide what role they want to play. (Author/JEH)

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RESEARCH ACTION BRIEF

Each *Research Action Brief* reports the findings of significant empirical research studies on a topic in educational management. From these findings implications are drawn for the operation of today's schools, thus serving as a guide for enlightened administrative action.

This ***Research Action Brief*** was prepared by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management in cooperation with the National School Boards Association.

Board or Superintendent: Who Manages the Schools?

The answer to the question "Who manages the schools?" seems clear. We all know that, in this country, education is a state responsibility and that nearly all states have assigned the legal responsibility for operating the schools to the local level, specifically to local school boards. The answer, then, is that the school boards manage the schools.

Just as there is a formally and legally correct answer concerning who runs the schools, there is also a conventional description of the role of the school board in the operation of the schools. The board is to be made up of lay persons who have been popularly elected and, thus, are representative of and responsible to the public. These representatives are to determine the general goals and direction of the district. The board is to be assisted in its work by an expert. This expert, the superintendent, is to help the board in its deliberations and to use his or her expertise to implement the board's policies and directives.

This is the classic description of the respective roles of the board and the superintenent. The board sets policy, and the superintendent executes it.

Although this conventional understanding has been widely accepted, the proper roles of the two parties have been debated for well over a hundred years. The debate has heated up again as over the last fifteen years there has been growing investigation into the relationship between boards and superintendents.

A variety of voices can now be heard saying that the roles are not what we think they are. While critics agree that the school board is nominally and legally in control, they have argued that boards are not always responsive to the public, that boards have abdicated their power and placed control of the schools in the hands of bureaucrats (superintendents and central office administrators) and teacher unions, and that local control, if not dead, is in jeopardy because control has been taken by other branches of government: state and federal legislatures, courts, and regulatory agencies.

While this examination of the research cannot address all these issues, it can look at what recent scholarship says about the crucial relationship between school boards and superintendents and outline current thinking about which of these parties is dominant and why. First, however, we need to take a look at the history of the troubled relationship.

The Way It Was: Two Views

Two sources are used in sketching the history of the roles of the board and the superintendent. One, Callahan, is a historian of education; the other, Tucker and Zeigler, is a team of political scientists who are interested in the political aspects of the governance of the schools. Their accounts provide different readings of recent history.

According to Callahan, the first major concern over the respective roles of the board and the superintendent came about because of a controversy in the Boston schools in the

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1840s. Prior to that time the schools had in effect been the complete province of local governments and were run in all matters by committees of appointed or elected citizens. Big-city committees had, by this time, become deeply involved in partisan politics and political machines.

In the 1840s a reform slate was elected to the school committee in Boston and formed a group to investigate the condition of the schools. The group found that student achievement was abysmal and that politics intruded into the operation of the schools. The group's solution was for a superintendent to be appointed to run the schools. Amid heated controversy, the reformers were unseated, but their effort bore fruit. By 1851 Boston had a full-time superintendent. In 1843, before the Boston controversy, only five cities had superintendents; by 1859, nineteen additional cities had created the office.

The trend toward the creation of superintendencies was furthered not only by cries of reformers who wanted to divorce boards from partisan politics but also by the growing realization that the volunteer school board members could not keep up with their job. During this period the rate of immigration was causing cities to grow dramatically and fostering great growth in the number of schools that the committees were trying to run.

As the number of superintendents increased, so did their dissatisfaction with their role. Few boards gave any real power to the superintendent. The crisis came to a head in the mid-1890s with the release of a report of a committee of administrators that called for legal changes giving superintendents nearly unbridled control of the schools. Boards should, according to the "Draper Report," be reduced in size, divorced from partisan politics, and limited to such matters as appointing superintendents, raising taxes, and setting policy. Although no laws were changed at the time and many superintendents lost their positions in struggles with their boards, eventually the reformers prevailed. Over the period up to 1960 when Callahan's history ends, the school board's role came to be that described earlier as the conventional role.

Although Tucker and Zeigler look at roughly the same time period (1835-present) and at the same events as Callahan, they come to very different conclusions. Whereas Callahan sees the evolution of a system that seems to provide the board and superintendent with checks and balances in their powers while still giving citizens a voice, Tucker and Zeigler see a lack of balance and a rising dominance of the superintendent.

To a large extent, Tucker and Zeigler view the period prior to the dominance of the reformers as the model of how governance of the schools should work. They argue that many of the practices that upset the reformers offered the layperson "maximum feasible participation" in the direction of the schools. During this period school board members were chosen in ward-based partisan elections. Because the elections were partisan, the board candidates had to meet party standards and, because the elections were ward-based, the standards the parties used were conformity to the desires of the wards. This conformity made for highly responsive boards and gave the lower classes and immigrants a voice in school decision-making.

While Tucker and Zeigler acknowledge that the partisan system was corrupt—board members did run for office for personal gain and did make appointments based on patronage—the researchers think the price was worth it. When the reformers had their way and the elections became at-large and nonpartisan, the kinds of people who ran for office changed. Board members came predominantly from the middle and professional classes—people who shared the superintendent's values and granted him or her too much latitude in the name of efficiency.

The Way It Is: Conflicting Views

The respective roles and strengths of boards and superintendents did not stop changing with the end of the reform period. Tucker and Zeigler declare that a new period began to develop about 1954 with the Supreme Court's decision in the *Brown* case that separate but equal schools are unconstitutional. This new era, the time of the "nationalization" of the schools, marks the entry of the federal and, to a lesser extent, state governments into the affairs of the schools.

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In view of these changes, the question arises anew: Is the board or the superintendent running the schools?

For their book *Governing American Schools,* Zeigler and Jennings (with Peak) surveyed board members and superintendents in eighty-two urban and rural school districts. These researchers conclude that the superintendent is still the dominant player. They, as did Tucker and Zeigler, assume that the proper test of school governance is democratic theory, according to which boards are responsive to the public and act in accordance with the public's desires. Based on this standard, school governance is not rated highly. Zeigler and Jennings used two indicators to establish how democratic the governance system is: how partisan the elections for the school board are and how much opposition to the superintendent the board provides.

Zeigler and Jennings also deal with factors that affect the relationship between the board and the superintendent once a board is voted in. In examining that area, the authors look at the resources potentially available to boards and superintendents for their use in influencing decision-making and the factors that affect the way those resources are used. In simple terms, one can say that the boards have authority resources—the legal right and responsibility to run the schools, including the right to fire the superintendent. Boards also may have the popular support of the community, the support of influential members of the community, and the personal resources of individual members of the board, such as knowledge of the schools and social status.

Superintendents also have resources. Perhaps the most important is his or her reputation as an expert. Other resources potentially available to the superintendent include political support from local groups and individuals, and his or her access to the information and resources of the school district.

The possession of these resources does not mean that they will be used. Although boards have the legal authority to run the schools, many board members do not understand that and, instead, see their role as interpreters of the district to the public. The way in which an issue is perceived by the board can also determine whether it will act. Zeigler and Jennings make a distinction between "internal" and "public" issues. Internal issues are those regarded as routine (administrative or "housekeeping") and are judged to be legitimately within the scope of the superintendent's role. Public issues tend to be more political and deal with matters that capture the interest of the public, such as construction bonds and financial referenda; these issues are seen to be the proper concern of the board. Zeigler and Jennings' evidence suggests that superintendents exert their power by defining most issues as internal.

Although these resource factors tend to effectively, if not legally, favor the superintendent, he or she is not always dominant. Different boards behave differently depending on their composition and their setting—urban, suburban, or rural. For instance, high socioeconomic status boards are more likely to stay out of the daily administration of the schools than are low status boards, which tend to view the superintendent as an employee; urban boards are more likely to disagree with superintendents than are other boards, but they are also more likely to eventually give in; and rural boards are less likely to disagree with superintendents but are more often successful in winning disagreements when they do arise. While acknowledging these differences, Zeigler and Jennings conclude that, on the whole, boards are subservient.

Although Zeigler and Jennings' view that superintendents are usually dominant is widely accepted, it is by no means universally held. Cuban, a specialist in urban school administration, found in his case studies of big-city superintendents that superintendents are not always able to deal with the pressures and influences of the office. He notes that the position is vulnerable to the board, that managing a large district is a complex task, and that the training and personalities of many superintendents do not prepare them for the internal and external pressures of the job. This is hardly a picture of a dominating force.

Boyd, an educational researcher with a background in political science, has analyzed the research on educational governance and concluded that there is evidence to support both views. Boyd acknowledges a debt to Zeigler and Jennings, but he also challenges their interpretation of some of their data. He argues that it is not whether a district is reformed or unreformed that determines the respective powers of the board and the superintendent so much as the interplay of a welter of factors that include the degree of urbanness of a district, the district's size, the heterogeneity or homogeneity of the district's population, the socioeconomic status of the district, and the nature of the particular issue in question.

In challenging Zeigler and Jennings, Boyd argues that if degree of conflict over educational issues (associated with unreformed districts) were the hallmark of districts with subordinate superintendents, then urban districts would be the ones in which boards most often win disputes. This is not the case. In fact, boards in small districts with homogeneous populations are more likely to win disputes. Boyd also points out that districts in which there is no competition for board seats have greater agreement between the board and the community than do districts in which there is competition.

In the end, Boyd describes what might almost be called a situational theory of conflict between boards and superintendents:

> I have proposed that while educators tend to dominate local educational policy making, they usually operate within significant, and generally neglected or underestimated, constraints imposed by the *local* community and the school board—not to mention those imposed by state and national forces. These constraints (or, put another way, the influence of the community and the board) are likely to vary primarily with the type of school district and the type of policy issue that is faced. The local citizenry and the board will tend to have more influence in *external, redistributive,* and *strategic* policy decisions, and in *smaller* and more *homogeneous* communities where the professionals tend to anticipate or reflect (especially in middle and upper middle class communities) community demands. The professionals, on the other

hand, will tend to have more influence in *internal* and *routine* policy decisions, and in *larger* and more *heterogeneous* communities.

Although the conclusion is different, one can see similarities between Boyd's analysis and that of Zeigler and Jennings. On the whole, it seems that communities and boards most often exert control in small, homogeneous districts and when they are confronted with issues that have high visibility and concern money. Superintendents more often dominate on matters that have to do with routine affairs and in larger, more heterogeneous communities.

Since most of the country's population resides in rural and suburban districts that are predominantly middle class, Boyd argues that most citizens are well served by boards that represent their values. In most cases, even if boards do not seem to be conferring with the public, the boards and superintendents are carrying out what they perceive to be the goals of the community. If they are wrong and the superintendent goes beyond what Boyd (borrowing from others) terms a "zone of tolerance," the community and then the board will act to constrain him or her.

In essence, then, Boyd argues that if most of the time superintendents seem to be running the schools, it is because they have the consent of the public and the board.

Implications

Normally, one turns to research for insights into how some aspect of the world works, not for specific instructions on how to act. Sometimes those insights seem contradictory and hard to apply to specific problems. Perhaps that seems to be the case with the research here. There is no shortage of insights, but how do they all fit? It seems that Tucker and Zeigler disagree with Callahan and that Boyd disagrees with Zeigler and Jennings.

Perhaps the place to look for direction is the now famous statement of Zeigler and Jennings: School boards should govern or be abolished. Practically, if school boards refuse to govern, their authority will be assumed by others: the state, the courts, the superintendent. The board's sole reason for being is to govern the schools. The manner in which the board governs is left to its judgment, subject to the laws of the state and the will of the electorate. Maybe this is the flaw in the system, but it may be the strength.

Board members can look at the data on how boards tend to act in specific kinds of communities and in the face of specific types of issues and draw their own conclusions whether the tendencies are good or bad, appropriate for their setting or inappropriate. Boards are not, however, bound by those tendencies. It is within the power of the board to determine its own course in school affairs.

The implication of the research, then, is that each board should decide for itself what kind of board it wants to be. But, to be effective it must make that decision. That is its job.

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management
University of Oregon
Eugene Oregon 97403